



VOCAL AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

LONDON: MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.

1909

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Set up and electrotyped. Published October, 1903. Reprinted
July, 1907; July, 1909.

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

3-24520

TO THOSE
WHEREVER FOUND
IN WHOM
THESE WORDS AWAKEN
ANY MEMORIES

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PREFACE

Who has not felt dissatisfaction with the way the Bible is read in public? Yet few realize how difficult it is to render the Scriptures by the voice.

Vocal expression needs the insight, criticism, and personal attention of a teacher. Yet, since all true art is founded, not upon imitation, but upon principles, I hope that those who carefully follow the suggestions of this book will find practical help in realizing their needs and possibilities and aid in teaching the Bible to classes or interpreting it in the pulpit or on the platform.

The book is intended for serious study, and not for entertainment. Accordingly, some repetitions have been necessary; for example, there are a dozen kinds of monotony, — some connected with change of pitch, others with pause, others with tone-color, others with inflection. All these varieties are distinct from one another, and if discussed at one time would hardly be understood. Again, the same passage is occasionally used as an illustration of more than one principle, to show the necessity of studying a lesson from different points of view, and also to emphasize the importance of the union of vocal modulations in expression. The student is recommended to select some important passage, such as John ix. or Luke xv. 11-32, and to test every principle, successively, by this one lesson.

No one should get the idea that some specific modulation or method of reading is applicable to only one verse or passage.

There is no absolutely fixed method according to which any sentence of Scripture must always be read. Most passages are capable of many renderings, according to the understanding, feeling, and personality of the reader. The interpretations of specific passages, and modes of rendering them, must be taken as suggestions or illustrations of principles. It is always helpful to realize a definite point of view. A principle can be illustrated best by specific examples of expression, and in every case the reader should test the rendering by actual practice. An interpretation should never be passively accepted. Not only the particular renderings suggested, but others, should be observed and brought to the test of demonstration.

During the past twenty-five years, the writer has endeavored to aid many to read the Bible aloud. If the reader feels that the results here embodied are inadequate, let him rest assured that no one will agree with him more quickly than the author. It is well, however, to remember that the book has had no predecessor. A few words on the neglect of vocal interpretation, or a short article on its importance, are all that can be found.

The author's greatest debt is due to those now publicly reading the Bible in all parts of the world whom he has endeavored to teach. Their earnest endeavors have been the author's chief inspiration and help.

IN GENERAL

I. THE OFFICE

I. The problem of Bible reading will be best understood by first studying the function of the BIBLE IN WORSHIP. A service consists of three offices: The leader speaks in (1) the *Sermon* as man to men; in (2) *Public Prayer* as man to God; but in (3) the *Scripture Lesson* from God to man.

II. The ideal function is made clearer by observing the CUSTOM AND PRACTICE. Bible reading was the most important element in the worship of the early Church, but it is greatly neglected at the present time.

III. To find a method of improving Bible reading, the GENERAL NATURE OF VOCAL EXPRESSION should be understood. (1) A few simple *Elementary Modulations of the Voice* form the reader's vocabulary. A pause before a phrase shows attention or the reception of the impression; touch indicates where the mind is concentrated; a change of pitch, the discrimination of idea from idea; inflection, the attitude of the speaker or his sense of the relation of ideas to each other, to his purpose, or to his audience. Feeling is manifested by tone-color or the emotional modulation of the resonance of the voice; while movement changes according to the reader's estimate of the value of what he says. (2) Vocal expression is the revelation of realization, and the *problem of improving it* differs from that of words. Vocal expression, and especially the vocal interpretation of the Bible, is subjective and difficult, but strangely neglected.

II. THE MESSAGE

IV. The LITERARY SPIRIT, or the human form of the Bible, must be understood before it can be realized or expressed by the voice.

Vocal expression demands a childlike attitude, free from theories. The reader must have critically studied and assimilated its deeper spirit. The Bible must be interpreted by the whole man.

V. The Story, or the NARRATIVE SPIRIT, is found all through the Bible; and the power to interpret it by the voice must be carefully mastered.

VI. The Bible is full of instruction and the DIDACTIC SPIRIT. The reader must make his hearer think, and give truth as simply and directly as possible.

VII. All forms of human expression are found in the Bible. The ORATORIC SPIRIT, the endeavor of some earnest soul to lead his fellow-men to higher convictions, appears everywhere, especially in the addresses, or sermons, of the Prophets, of Paul, and even of the Master.

VIII. In all early literature literal facts, or stories, were related to indicate deeper meaning. The ALLEGORIC SPIRIT permeates the Bible more than many realize. It demands that vocal expression be very simple and suggestive.

IX. The LYRIC SPIRIT reaches its greatest climax in the "sublime lyric" of the Bible, and its interpretation demands a quickened imagination and exalted feeling.

X. The Bible interprets human character, and hence is filled with the DRAMATIC SPIRIT. The intense realization of situation, human motives, or difference in point of view, should be rendered by the reader with sympathy and simple truthfulness.

XI. The sublimest element in human poetry is the EPIC SPIRIT. The dramatic demands that the reader shall enter into sympathy with his fellow-men, the epic that he shall be himself, and be impressed by events in relation to the ideals of the race or to the plans of the Creator. The whole Bible is necessarily full of the epic spirit.

XII. The hardness of the heart and the difficulty of teaching human souls a higher truth, required of the Master an ARTISTIC METHOD. He expressed an unrealized truth in a form that could be grasped and held until it would awaken gradually a realization of the truth. The vocal interpretation of such an art demands great suggestiveness and artistic intensity.

XIII. The LITERARY FORMS have not been invented, but are

natural, and must necessarily be revealed by VOCAL EXPRESSION. The reader must comprehend the artistic nature of man and the suggestive power of the human voice to intimate the sublimest truths.

III. THE TECHNIQUE

XIV. To improve vocal expression the reader must be led to comprehend and master the RHYTHMIC ACTIONS OF THE MIND. Attention and the progressive movement of the mind must be increased.

XV. The rhythm of thinking is revealed by the RHYTHMIC MODULATION OF THE VOICE. The fact that the mind is receiving any impression in reading or speaking is shown by (1) *pause*. The location of the concentration of the mind is indicated by a definite (2) *touch* upon the central word of the phrase. The rhythmic movement of thinking shows itself by (3) *phrasing*, or the gathering of words into groups around the centre of attention.

XVI. The mind not only moves from idea to idea, but has DISCRIMINATION between ideas. This is of primary importance in thinking and expression. Each idea must be vividly and definitely grasped.

XVII. Every CHANGE IN IDEA is shown by a CHANGE OF PITCH. This variation of pitch is so simple, natural, and free that it is often overlooked. The degree of variation is in proportion to the vividness of ideas, and the accentuation of discrimination of thinking is the primary means of preventing monotony—the most common fault in Bible reading.

XVIII. The mind not only has rhythmic succession, but relates ideas to each other. This METHOD IN THINKING is the result of the deepest and most exalted action of human reason, and demands attention in reading.

XIX. This logical instinct, or power of relating idea to idea, is shown by INFLECTION. (1) *Direction* of inflection indicates the attitude of the speaker's mind toward truth. (2) *Length* of inflection shows the degree of earnestness, or saliency. (3) The *abruptness* of inflection, the degree of control with intensity of excitement. (4) *Straightness* of inflection is in proportion to the dignity,

weight, and directness of the expression. (5) Inflections are improved by developing the logical action of the mind.

XX. The free expression of METHOD is shown by what has been called MELODY. While every word has an inflection, all the words of a phrase are gathered by these inflections around the governing one. This constitutes (1) *Conversational Form*. The reader must be as free and flexible in revealing the great centres of attention as in natural conversation. One important element of conversational melody is found in (2) *Subordination*. This is especially apt to be violated in Bible reading. One of the greatest difficulties is to place unemphatic parts in the background. Melody demands the greatest possible (3) *Range*. The simplest and most common as well as the most extreme changes in thought must be indicated by corresponding changes of pitch. This is the chief element in naturalness. Violations of the natural melody of the voice have been called (4) *Ministerial Tunes*. These must be conquered by genuineness of thinking, by increasing the definite attention to individual ideas, and by intensely and directly relating each idea to the whole truth.

XXI. The reader of the Bible must indicate, by the modulations of his voice, the ARGUMENT. The degrees of prominence given to ideas are infinite in number. A real understanding of the passage and a command of the modulations of the voice, enable the reader to present the exact progression of the thought in the most weighty and difficult passages.

XXII. The IMAGINATION has an important FUNCTION in finding the ideal relations and sympathetic bearings of truth. Ideas must be given with atmosphere and kinship to the human soul. Genuine feeling is chiefly dependent upon the imagination, for sympathy is due to insight.

XXIII. The presence of IMAGINATION in EXPRESSION is shown by a more delicate and sympathetic union of all the modulations of the voice. Tone-color, or the sympathetic modulation of resonance, is its more specific language. Sameness of emotion must be characterized by more definite and intense imaginative realization and sympathetic use of the voice.

XXIV. The reader must not only have thought, but experience; must not only think and imagine, but feel, and must be true to his

whole nature. He must adopt a definite point of view and realize a truth so vividly that it must awaken the right emotion. The dramatic, or sympathetic, instinct must lead the reader to identify himself with every situation, point of view, or shade of experience. This instinct is especially necessary in interpreting the many transitions found in the Bible.

XXV. The rhythmic pulsations of thinking and feeling are continually varied, and express themselves by modifying the MOVEMENT of speech. The reader must reveal the relative importance of ideas, sentences, and paragraphs. He must distinguish what he approves from what he disapproves, what he regards as negative from what he regards as positive, what is merely illustrative from what is central. Movement indicates the genuineness of life and realization. Monotony of movement indicates indifference, neutrality, or death.

XXVI. The VOICE MODULATIONS are always in UNION with one another. To overwork one is to be unnatural. To exaggerate one at the expense of others is not emphasis, but chaos. While accentuation of one is necessary, this demands also sympathetic and subordinate increase and union of the others. There is danger in exaggerating some one method of emphasis.

IV. PREPARATION AND THE SERVICE

XXVII. In addition to a general knowledge of the spirit of the Message and the elements of vocal expression, such attention should be given to the SELECTION and ARRANGEMENT of passages that the LESSON may have unity.

XXVIII. A lesson should be thoroughly understood, and needs special PREPARATION every time it is read.

XXIX. In preparing the lesson, the reader can secure great assistance by study of the SPIRIT OF THE GREEK. Peculiar shades of meaning, which cannot be translated into English words, can be interpreted by the voice, but the Greek must be studied in the spirit, and not in the letter.

XXX. The natural actions of the mind are reflected in the primitive SPIRIT OF THE HEBREW. The same principles apply, but repetition has special force.

XXXI. The reader should use artistic tests for SELF-CRITICISM. He must be simple and truthful. The lesson should have unity, and all modulations must harmonize. Every modulation must be accentuated in such a way as to cause strength, not weakness. All true reading must be reposeful and suggestive.

XXXII. RESPONSIVE READING is different in its vocal expression from other modes of rendering the Bible. It demands careful accentuation of rhythm and great decision of movement.

XXXIII. Some readers are troubled with SPECIAL QUESTIONS. No one version is adapted to all. On the whole, the American Revised is best, or one should be arranged carefully by the reader himself. The whole body should be expanded by emotion, and the attitude should express the feelings; but there should be no motions or superficial modes of expression.

XXXIV. The relations of the Scripture lesson to THE SERVICE should be carefully studied. The best illustration of the different elements of worship and their relations is, possibly, the Book of Common Prayer. The outgrowth of the experience of Christian leaders in all ages, as embodied in this and other services, should be carefully analyzed.

XXXV. The reader must be permeated with the spirit of the passage. He must command the thought, the literary form; but most of all, the right feeling toward the truth must permeate his being. A thorough study of the problem is needed for simple mastery. Of all exercises, the reading of the Bible takes the deepest hold upon the human heart.

INTRODUCTION

Few persons who have had any share in training men for the Christian ministry have escaped a sense of failure in teaching their students how to read. No professional duty would seem to be more elementary. The Bible is so rich in dramatic, lyrical, and narrative interest, and the preacher is so warmly concerned with the Biblical message he has to bring, that nothing beyond reasonable intelligence would appear to be needed to make the Bible lesson a stirring, calming, or convincing element in public worship. Most listeners, however, would testify that no part of worship is, as a rule, so perfunctory and uninspiring. Very rarely are there the marks of careful study, spiritual sympathy, and interpretative power. It often seems as if the Bible had been hastily thrown open at the lesson for the day or the passage containing the text, and as if the preacher's preparation had been reserved for what he conceived to be the more important task of delivering his own discourse. There is, as this volume remarks (p. 294), not only "hard shell" preaching, but "hard shell" reading. Congregations, as the Prodigal Son said of himself, would fain be filled with husks, and no man gives to them. The reading of the Bible seems a part of what are sometimes described as "introductory exercises," requiring, however, little exercise of mind by the preacher

and great exercise of patience by the congregation. I have even heard it argued that the Bible ought to be read in an artificial, lifeless, or stilted manner, lest its contents should be confounded with ordinary literature.

If the Bible has to endure in many ministers the results of carelessness, indolence, or misplaced reverence, it often suffers not less from histrionic art. Where elocution has been cultivated by preachers, it has usually been under teachers who care more for Shakespeare than for the Bible; and the consequence is often bad acting of the Bible as drama, instead of good reading of the Bible as literature. If anything is worse in the pulpit than slovenliness, it is excess of art. One who reads badly gets no attention, but one who reads too well calls attention to his own performance; and it is better that the Bible reading should be a time of congregational repose than a time of theatrical effort. How to interpret intelligently but not extravagantly, with sympathy but without artificiality, the varied messages of the Bible, becomes, then, for the preacher a serious duty, and is becoming almost a lost art. Of few modern ministers can it be affirmed, as it was said of Channing, and as no doubt it has been said of many spiritual leaders, that to hear him read the Bible was to be admitted to the very sources of religious power.

What are the qualifications for such reading? They are of two kinds. On the one hand are the untaught gifts of discernment, refinement, wisdom, self-effacement, sympathy. No professor of elocution can make an effective Bible-reader out of a light-minded, consequential, self-assertive, or sentimental man. Reading is an extraordinary revelation of character; and it would

surprise many a minister to be told with what precision his reading of the Bible betrayed affectation, or hardness, or indolence, or conceit. On the other hand, there are many traits of effective Bible reading which can be easily acquired by a teachable man. He can be saved from artificiality, corrected in blunders, disciplined in a rational use of the voice, restrained from employing the nose or throat as organs of expression, and, more than all, encouraged to take pains, and to be ashamed of appearing before his congregation with a Bible passage unstudied, haltingly delivered, or misunderstood.

It is a satisfaction to commend a book which approaches its subject with this rational intention, and which is, I think, both in its method and its spirit practically without precedent. Dr. Curry has not only long experience in dealing with the technical needs of preachers, but sympathy with the ideals of the profession. His instruction has been marked by sanity, moderation, adaptability, and an acquaintance with the Bible which goes far beyond its language and form. He now presents in a single volume the experience of a lifetime; and his teaching should bring to many preachers instruction, suggestion, warning, and courage.

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HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL,
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
September, 1903.

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